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Poor Obama!

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By Bryan R. Gibson

I feel quite sorry for the hand that the Obama administration has been dealt in its first term. After all, he came to office during the worst economic crisis the world has seen since the 1930s, the American economy was virtually bankrupt, America is completely divided politically, and he faces Republican obstructionism. And these are but a sampling of his *domestic* problems. In the international realm, Obama has tackled a number of issues, but nothing as chaotic and potentially dangerous as the present crises in the Arab world. The crisis that Obama now faces is perhaps the most challenging foreign policy crisis since the Islamic revolution of 1979. A tectonic shift could be taking place in the region with pro-American autocrats being replaced by popular, though potentially radical, governments. Tunisia led the way; Egypt is attempting to follow; Jordan is facing protests, of great concern, now Yemen is also revolting. The latter of these is clearly the most dangerous of them all with the presence of al-Qaida, but that is not my focus here. Moving on, the crisis that President Obama faces is a foreign policy nightmare unlike anything since the Iranian revolution. And just as Jimmy Carter was in 1979, Barack Obama is now in the unenviable position of having to choose between maintaining support for its regional allies or abandon them in the face of popular, grass-root, largely democratic uprisings.

The difficulty for Obama is that the sword cuts both ways. On the one hand, if he chooses to openly support the regimes, America's influence on the Arab street will plummet and the term "Great Satan" will truly take on a much more encompassing meaning. Indeed, choosing this option is problematic on a number of levels. Most obviously, the United States, which champions itself as the bastion of freedom, will be openly siding with repression, authoritarianism, and dictatorship. These are not quite the qualities that the United States embodies. Secondly, it will undermine all of America's efforts to demonize Iran for cracking down harshly in the aftermath of the June 2009 elections. After all, it would be very hypocritical to condemn the Iranian government and side with the opposition Green movement, while not doing the same with the protests in Egypt. The question really boils down to how much the administration needs the Mubarak regime to protect US interests in the region.

On the other hand, if the Obama administration comes out and supports (even tacitly) the protesters in Egypt, as it belatedly did in Tunisia, it will be sending a clear message to its most steadfast regional allies, namely Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the Gulf States, that the United States will not prop up a collapsing pillar. This was exactly what happened in 1979 when the Carter administration backed the Shah to the very end. Meanwhile, they did not open contacts with members of the opposition, which meant that the United States would have absolutely no ability to influence a post-Shah Iran. The United States should not make this fatal error again.

The crux of the problem facing the Obama administration is the unpredictability of post-revolutionary situations. Power struggles are nearly impossible to predict. If you back the wrong candidate, you lose. But who is the right candidate? Certainly in Egypt's case Mohamed El-Baradei himself as a viable, moderate, liberal, and internationally influential candidate to replace Mubarak. But while El-Baradei may be well known internationally, critics of him point out that he is not particularly well known by the rank-and-file protesters, which may pose problems for backing him as a replacement for Mubarak. Nevertheless, the fact remains that as long as Mubarak clings to power, the Obama administration has no choice but to walk a fine line between supporting its ally and throwing in its lot with the opposition.

In the end, the situation on the ground will dictate itself with or without American influence. But whatever tact the Obama administration chooses to take, he runs the risk of deepening the crisis. If he backs the regime, he associates the United States with repression and autocracy. But if he backs the Egyptian people, he sends a clear message to the leaders of the Arab world that America will only prop them to a point. In the end, the line towed by Obama on January 28 when he directly addressed the crisis in Egypt reflects the views conveyed above. In his speech, Obama called "upon the Egyptian authorities to refrain from any violence against peaceful protestors," while cautioning protestors to express their grievances peacefully. "The United States has a close partnership with Egypt and we've cooperated on many issues, including working together to advance a more peaceful region. But we've also been clear that there must be reform – political, social, and economic reforms that meet the aspirations of the Egyptian people." It is quite clear that Obama recognizes the difficulty of his situation and has decided to take a conciliatory approach to the crisis. In the meantime, Obama's best bet is to continue his moderate line, urging the Mubarak regime to reform, while conveying tacit support to the people of Egypt, but not openly coming out against the regime. Most importantly, Obama absolutely needs to prepare for the worst (i.e. building contacts quietly with opposition groups), while hoping for the best.

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